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Samuel Beckett and Music

*Nadežda Mosusova***SAMUEL BECKETT AND MUSIC***An Absurd Essay about the Idea of Musicality  
and Musical Form in Samuel Beckett's Short Pieces  
– Influences and Possibilities*

**Abstract:** The premise of musicality of Beckett's short dramas contains more questions than answers. Is the musicality of text present only in the work of Samuel Beckett? Do only the (musical) stage remarks in Beckett's dramas suggest the idea of musicality? Can the absurdity of his output be expressed with music and through music? Some short musical compositions, especially by Alexandre Scriabine, can be in some way compared with Beckett's "dramaticules", but only in form not in the meaning and musical language. The question of hidden influences remains to be developed.

**Key-words:** Samuel Beckett, theatre of the absurd, absurd literature, abstract painting, music, rhythm, influence, Alexandre Scriabine.

In the 1953, with the premiere of (written in 1948, published in 1952) drama *Waiting for Godot* in Paris, by Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), a new theatre was definitely born in the Western world: the Theatre of the Absurd. Martin Esslin (1918–2002), the theoretician, the inventor of the term, and first analyst of the Beckett's work tried and succeeded in his famous book *The Theatre of the Absurd* to explain the meaning of the absurd and also to analyze similar works of some Beckett's (existentialist) predecessors and contemporaries. From Esslin's writings we learn about playwrights that influenced Beckett's work and also the painters which brought to the attention the idea of the absurd in general. The most interesting statement of Esslin, however, is the very formula of the absurdity, explained with a musical term – harmony!

“‘Absurd’ originally means ‘out of harmony’, in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: ‘out of harmony with reason of propriety: incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.’”<sup>1</sup> And further: “Beckett's plays lack plot even more completely than other works of the Theatre of the Absurd. Instead of a linear development, they present their author's intuition of the human condition by a method that is essentially polyphonic; they confront

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Third Edition first published in Great Britain in Pelican Books 1980, reprinted in Peregrine Books, 1987, 1988 (here quoted), 23. (First edition appeared in Great Britain in 1961).

their audience with an organized structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other and that must be apprehended in their totality, rather like the different themes in a symphony.”<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the German playwright and painter Wolfgang Hildesheimer (1916–1991), being also an “absurdist” like Beckett, gave his opinion about the Absurd, in a lecture held in Erlangen in 1960, published in 1963 (*Über das absurde Theater*).<sup>3</sup> He did not use musical (nor even pictorial) terms to present the appearance of the new theatre, although he wrote plays with music, as *Pastorale, Groteske in einem Akt* (1958). We are not expecting a strict musical approach from a non-musician as we are not insisting to receive from a non-musician like Esslin the adequate explaining of the expression “out of harmony”. What does it even mean to a musician? To-day?

What did he, Esslin, know about the musical polyphony or symphony themes? What did Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) understand about the counterpoint in having naming his novel *Point Counter Point* (1928)? Did the Russian symbolists study music to be able to use musical terms as titles and contents for their poems: Andrei Bely (1880–1934) for *Northern Symphony* (1902)? But, speaking in musical terms, Martin Esslin, to be sure, opened definitely the path to non-musicians, i.e. literary historians and critics to discuss the musicality of literature, especially of Beckett’s texts.

It was odd that the proclaimed new theatre of Samuel Beckett, suddenly famous author of two (crucified) men in search for God (Godot) was explicitly verbal, after all efforts of all experimental theatres worldwide – after and before World War I and after Konstantin Stanislavsky’s (1863–1938) golden years, – to create a wordless pageant, like Soviet avant-gardist, Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1942) who was well known in the West, in 1920’s already. Let us remember also symbolist playwrights (in Russia) who did not trust words and turned to pantomime.

Who influenced Beckett in his “narrative” way? Was he familiar with Russian literature? With classics – the main and unique “musical” absurdist between them being Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852) with his *Nose* (1836) and *Dead Souls* (1841/2)? Could it have been the avant-garde of Russian emigration, which inspired the work of Samuel Beckett? Alexei Remizov’s (1877–1957) *Music Teacher* (1949)? A very musical, absurd text of a novelist and painter (Remizov excelled in graphics like Hildesheimer), built on mosaic form musical principles, talking about émigré life in Paris and Russian literature, Gogol in particular.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> See Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Theaterstücke, Über das absurde Theater*, Frankfurt a. M. (Suhrkamp), 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Алексей Ремизов, *Учитель музыки, Каторжная идиллия* (Aleksei Remizov, *Professeur de musique, Idylle-calvaire*), Paris, 1983.

What about the “historian” Marc Aldanov (1889–1957)? Both Russians lived in France!

Let it be repeated that young Beckett spent two years in Paris from September 1928 until the fall 1930, as lector of English language at the *L'École normale supérieure*. We are sure that he came across some Russian writers, or scholars. After all, one of his absurdist colleagues and contemporaries, Arthur Adamov (1908–1970) was of Russian origin (of émigré parents), living in Paris and writing in French like himself – and translating in French Russian literature, Gogol's poem-novel *Dead Souls*, being also the author of its French dramatization (published 1960). Not to forget that after the war appeared illustrations (etchings 1923–1927) to *Dead Souls* by Marc Chagall (1887–1985).<sup>5</sup>

Developing the theme of absurdity we pose another question: where is the music in the whole story of influences. If there is medieval absurd literature and modern absurd, abstract painting, does the absurd music exist somehow to put its seal on the work of absurdists, especially on Beckett. Not to speak about Adamov, Eugene Ionesco (1909–1994) or Jean Genet (1910–1986). The influence in the field of music was reverse. The “absurd” music usually emerges from the composed absurd texts and was conceived on Russian soil, based on the classical Russian literature in the stage works by Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975).

Was Beckett at all familiar with any kind of Russian music, be it romantic or modern, we do not know. Living in Paris he could be informed about the then new Russian music exposed through the achievements of the *Ballets Russes*. *Apollon musagète* by Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) and *Le fils prodigue* by Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) were en vogue in these years in Paris, with its premieres in 1928 and 1929. Beckett could also hear about new French music, about Darius Milhaud (1892–1974) and his short symphonies and operas.

It is very interesting that Beckett loved France so very much to be ready to share the fate of French people in the south of the country during the World War II in the so called Free Zone, taking part in the Movement of Résistance. After the war he is in Paris again writing in French language *Mercier and Camier* (1946), a novel about two pals who survive with talking to each other. The verbal principle stated before the war continued in 1948 with *Molloy*, *Malone meurt* and the crucial play *En attendant Godot*. Nothing connected with the war or with the Résistance in France was directly mentioned in those works. Beckett's experience was finally transformed and strengthened into canned disaster, hermetic loneliness and abstract horror.

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<sup>5</sup> Nikolai Gogol, *Les ames mortes*, Paris, Tériade, 1948, see Susan Compton, *Chagall*, London, 1985, 264–267.

Hardly the premiere of *Waiting for Godot* passed, the analysts started to talk about the musicality of famous Irishman's work. What kind of musicality? Beckett wrote pieces with incidental music and pieces without it. Later, some plays by him have musical titles, like *Ghost Trio*, 1976, using Beethoven's music, or *Ohio Impromptu*, 1981, not applying incidental music at all. But the most important thing was the sound, be it the sound of word or sound of music in the combinations with words. This is why Beckett (Hildesheimer as well!) wrote also pieces for radio, one of them making attention in 1963 – *Cascando* – , with incidental music by Marcel Michalovici (1892–1976).

After non-musicians who wrote and are still writing about special musical qualities in Beckett's plays or novels, also musicians entered discussions about the fact. For musicians/musicologists it is quite natural to analyze the daring composers' experiments in putting Beckett's plays and novels to music, as for instance his drama *Play* (1963) which became the (anti)opera *La comédie* (1968) by Roman Haubenstock-Ramati (1919–1994) or in 1969 performed *Sinfonia* by Luciano Berio (1925–2003) with spoken text from the Beckett's *Unnameable* (1949). There are some of the musical theorists still considering – with good evidence – (at the end of the millennium) the incompatibility of Beckett's writings with "Vertonung", like in the chamber opera *Come and Go* (1965) by Heinz Holliger (1939).<sup>6</sup> The latter had already experience with Beckett, composing the opera on *What Where* (1984) in 1988.

But this is another point if the Beckett's prose is suitable or not for music, opera, ballet or something else. We have aesthetical "proofs" that the "classical" Russian absurdity was successfully expressed with musical means, in the operas by Shostakovich *The Nose* (1928) and by Rodion Shchedrin (1932) *Dead Souls* (1976), both after Nikolai Gogol.<sup>7</sup> We have also to take into account that at the time of Holliger's stage work almost "impossible" or most inaccessible texts like this of Victor Yeropoyev's (1947) absurd story *The Life with an Idiot* (1980) is put to music by Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998), performed in Amsterdam in 1992, and before that the opera by Edison Denisov (1929–1996) *The Foam of the Days* (1981), after Boris Vian's (1920–1959) novel *L'Écume des jours* (1946), a surrealist love story, was premiered in Paris 1986.

When one has on mind the considerable musical education Beckett has acquired as well as his exceptional, almost synaesthetic artistic sensibility, it

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<sup>6</sup> Krystyna Tarnawska-Kaczorowska, *Ars nova* beim "Warschauer Herbst" '91 und etwas ältere *Ars* beim Mozart Festival, Deutsch-polnische Ansichten zur Literatur und Kultur, Jahrbuch 1991, Deutsches Polen-Institut, Darmstadt, 1992, 271, 272,

<sup>7</sup> See Nadežda Mosusova, *Nikolai Gogol's Theatre of the Absurd on the Musical scene (Гоголь в театрі абсурда на музичкој сцени)*, Опера – од обреда до уметничке форме, Зборник текстова, Београд, ФМУ, 2001.

appears obvious that from the very beginning of his pursuits the writer regarded literature – his literature – as music. To clarify the matter, one can say that not only did Beckett write pieces with or to music, but he primarily created music itself, true verbal “concertante” that almost makes one forget him describing “the most abhorrent aspects of the human condition”.<sup>8</sup>

The concept, or rather the writer’s natural predisposition, may best be seen in his short plays, whether or not incidental music for them has been envisaged. Moreover, Beckett gave musical form to his works. Among the first who perceived this in Yugoslavia was a non-musician, Jovan Hristich (1933–2002), a Belgrade theatre historian, and editor of Beckett’s translated dramas. Even his dramolets and dramaticules were regarded by Hristich as “perfect music pieces revealing something which seemed impossible – to achieve a dramatic form for human loneliness”.<sup>9</sup>

The “dramaticules” particularly speak in testimony of Beckett’s deliberate orientation towards giving them a form of musical torso, similar to the free forms of piano pieces employed by the 20th century composers. Beckett’s short works resemble music miniatures, and represent counterparts to the pieces composed by Alexandre Scriabine (1872–1915) and Arnold Schönberg (1874–1951). As it is known the miniature implies condensed means of expression. Scriabine, a virtuoso in achieving culmination within a limited time period, completely distinguished himself in the piano miniatures.

It is also thanks to the already mentioned Beckett’s stage remarks and drawings, equally pertaining to movement, atmosphere, lighting or incidental music selected by the author himself that one gains an impression of a musical score, characterized by meticulous agogics, typical of Scriabine’s late work. Comparing such remote worlds as Beckett’s and Scriabine’s there is no faintest hint on music of the latter being “absurd”. There is a pure view on the musical form in literature, discussed in some musicological works.<sup>10</sup> A sober book from the old good times when the music and musicology were not expropriated or usurped by linguistics, encourages the reader in that respect by qualifying Scriabine’s and Schönberg’s short pieces as “clearly a new musical genre, relying heavily on literary art”.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Current Biography, 1970, see under Beckett, p.30.

<sup>9</sup> From the Foreword by Hristich to Beckett’s dramas published in Serbian, Belgrade, 1981, 36.

<sup>10</sup> For instance Gogol’s *Diary of a Madman* regarded as the music suite. See Nadežda Mosusova, *Stanojlo Rajicich’s Operatic Output (Operski opus Stanojla Rajicića)*, Muzikološki zbornik, Ljubljana, 1981, 90.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin S. Brown, *Music and Literature – A Comparison of the Arts*, Athens, Georgia, 1948, Chapter XVIII “Literary Types in Music”, 223,224, resting upon the statements by E. Newman from 1925, *A Small Poem in Music*. Brown is also analyzing the imposed musicality of the Huxley’s novel *Point Counter Point*, 209–211, or

Being aware of the semiotic system of its own in a literary work as that of Beckett's, and of the very strict and highly sophisticated harmonic system underlying Scriabine's musical thinking (elaborated and confirmed in his later work) there can be found no way of comparing the two unless using the arbitraries on the subject in a very personal, subjective manner. So, neither the contents of Beckett's short pieces nor author's dramatic form for human loneliness have anything in common with the Scriabine's opus of expressly ecstatic character. This music glorifies the triumph of personality, of the individual – it aspires to reach the divine, – whereas Beckett's dramas of the absurd evoke images of a hell of senselessness and hopelessness. Nevertheless, their aesthetics do overlap in some way: on certain coordinates the last among musical romanticists and the playwright of the avant-garde have met.

One becomes intrigued in the like fashion by the fact that Scriabine also wrote music of a lyrical-contemplative nature, illustrating sometimes the composer's profound feeling of sorrow and tragedy. Both feelings, the one of yearning and that of pain are expressed in Scriabine's music by an exceptionally original rhythm, leading one to make some kind of comparisons between his compositions and Beckett's dramas.

The musicality of Beckett's texts is beyond doubt based on the distribution of vowels and consonants, but is to no lesser degree dependent on the rhythm itself. It could also be associated with the rhythm in Scriabine's piano compositions, in this particular case the miniatures such as the *Preludes* op. 11 (1888–1896) with their whimsical changes of metre and the iambic structure.

As Beckett's pieces are supposed to be interpreted by use of a metronome or a stop-watch in order to measure the phrases, the pauses, the silences between the phrases and words, especially in the dramas containing the "nonverbal communication",<sup>12</sup> based also on some kind of Meyerhold's biomechanics, the whole situation reminds us of the harmonic rhythm of Scriabine's compositions. In support of this statement one can take as example the drama-monologue *Eh, Joe* (1965 – a television play) with its up-beats and dotted rhythm and such a high level of musicality produced by the specific distribution of vowels and consonants that Scriabine's No 6 of the *Seven Preludes* op. 17, *Andante doloroso* (1895/6) could be subtitled by the text of the same style.

Another Beckett's work where a parallel could be drawn between his text and Scriabine's music (taking apart Beckett's quite possible unfamiliarity with the work of the Russian composer) is dramaticule *Nacht und*

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pretentious titles as *Symphonie en blanc majeur* by Theophile Gautier (1811–1872), 163, as *licentia poetica*.

<sup>12</sup> See David K. Danow, *The Dialogue Sign, Essays on the major Novels of Dostoevsky*, Peter Long Publishing Inc., New York, 1991, 18.

*Träume* (after Franz Schubert – 1983) where the stage direction “gently” is frequently encountered, while Scriabine as a pianist was famous for his pianissimi, also often applied in his compositions, e.g. in the one movement *Fifth Sonata* op. 53 (1907): after pp *Presto con allegrezza* and f *imperioso*, abruptly p and pp *sotto voce* – *misterioso* – *affanato*.

Samuel Beckett was inspired by music and inspired musicians. He also influenced many of the writers, partially Edward Albee (1928) and Fernando Arrabal (1932). None of them, however, used incidental music in their dramas nor did they think about the musicality in Beckett’s way. The Irish Nobel-prize winner (1969) exerted also an impact on the Soviet dissident playwrights: Andrei Amalrik (1938) wrote about Beckett being “the master of perfect organization”.<sup>13</sup>

Beckett’s intercourse with artists is still left to be investigated. His relationship with Alberto Giacometti (1910–1966), who made sets for *Waiting for Godot* in 1961, and with Max Ernst (1891–1976) who drew illustrations for his book *Aus einem aufgegebenen Werk und kurze Spiele* (*From an Abandoned Work*), Frankfurt, 1966,<sup>14</sup> cannot be avoided. Especially is the Ernst’s case in this connection interesting, his work being evidently influenced by music. By which one, it is supposed to be explored in the future like the meaning of the abundance of all sophisticated stage remarks in Beckett dramas: is everything clear “coming out” of his “scores”? Maybe are they “music (or texts) for the eyes”, better seen (read) then heard (this is also the case with the “genuine” musical scores from where the expression “Augenmusik” is taken). But the further possibilities are offered with Beckett’s output to the new multimedia composers (for anti-operas also) and the “new musicology”, as well.

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<sup>13</sup> Андрей Амальрик, *Пьесы*, Амстердам, 1970, *О себе как писателе пьес* (Andrei Amalrik, *Plays*, Amsterdam, 1970, with author’s Introduction), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Recently shown at an exhibition of Max Ernst’s etchings and book illustrations at the Belgrade Museum of Modern Art (2004).

Нагежда Мосусова

### СЕМЈУЕЛ БЕКЕТ И МУЗИКА

Апсурдни есеј о идеји музикалности и музичкој форми у Бекетовим кратким комадима. Утицаји и могућности

(Резиме)

С обзиром на своје музичко образовање и несвакидашњи уметнички сензибилитет сасвим је могуће да је Семјуел Бекет (1906–1989), експонент позоришне естетике театра апсурда, имао од почетка свог књижевног рада идеју литературе као музике и идеју музичке форме примењене на литературу. Најбоље се таква тежња или природна предиспозиција може сагледати у прозним делима, малим драмама и „драматикулама“, без обзира да ли је за њих аутор предвидео сценску музику или не. Тешко је издвојити ко је од књижевника, композитора, чак и сликара, могао утицати на текав његов став.

Може се рећи да Бекет није само писао комаде са музиком или уз музику, већ да је стварао саму музику, праве вербалне концертантне композиције одређене музичке форме. Парадоксално је при том да само његово дело никако није захваљан материјал за музичке композиције.

Кратке драме из последње деценије Бекетовог живота сведоче да им је аутор свесно давао облик књижевног торза слично форми клавирских комада композитора 20 века. И кроз пишчеве прецизне дидасталије и цртеже, који се подједнако односе на покрет, атмосферу, осветљење или сценску музику, стиче се утисак минуциозне агогике једне музичке партитуре. Бекетова последња дела јесу литерарне минијатуре, могући пандани комадима Александра Скрјабина или Арнолда Шенберга.

Свесни посебног семиотског система књижевног дела Семјуела Бекета и врло разрађеног, високо софистицираног хармонског система Скрјабиновог музичког језика, избегавамо произвољности у поређењима литературе и музике тиме што су за ову прилику изабрани примери Скрјабинових композиција више лирско-контемплативне природе: *Прелиуди* оп. 11 и 17, као и делови *Петте сонате* оп. 53.

Са оним другим делима, изразито екстатичног карактера, каква је углавном целокупна музика Александра Скрјабина, клавирска или симфонијска, Бекетови садржаји немају никакве везе, па ни његова драмска форма људске усамљености и безнадежности.

Ма како неприступачно музици било дело Семјуела Бекета, његов је опус у више махова био инспирација инструменталним и оперским композиторима, отварајући својим специфичним квалитетима нове могућности нарочито у области музичко-сценске уметности.

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Scriabine A.:82.– 2,09 Beckett S.